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Analysis and Information on the First Great Awakening

The Great Awakening

Significance of the Great Awakening: Roots of Revolution

The major effect of the Awakening was a rebellion against authoritarian religious rule which spilled over into other areas of colonial life. Amidst the growing population of the colonies within the 18th Century and mass public gatherings, charismatic personalities such as Whitefield and Tennent rolled through to deliver their messages. Though a religious movement, the Awakening had repercussions in cultural and political spheres as well. Customs of civility and courtesy, the governing norms of life in the colonies, were set aside in favor of a more quarrelsome age. Practices and mind-sets were changed by the Awakening like never before.

Towards an American Identity

Revivalism in the colonies did not form around a complex theology of religious freedom, but nevertheless the ideas it produced opposed the notion of a single truth or a single church. As preachers visited town after town, sects began to break off larger churches and a multitude of Protestant denominations sprouted. The older groups that dominated the early colonies – the Puritans and the Anglicans – eventually began a drastic downward trend in popularity. Although they accounted for about 40% of American congregations as late as 1760, that number eventually dropped to under 2.5% by 1790.

The social effect of multitudes of new denominations was not, however, a fracturing of communities, but a unifying drive which helped to create a “national consciousness”.

The effect of Great Awakening unity was an attitude that went against the deferential thinking that consumed English politics and religion. Rather than believing that God’s will was necessarily interpreted by the monarch or his bishops, the colonists viewed themselves as more capable of performing the task. The chain of authority no longer ran from God to ruler to people, but from God to people to ruler. The children of revivalism later echoed this radicalism and popular self-righteousness in the American Revolution, when self-assertion turned against the tyrannical ways of George III. It was not to any church that the signers of the Declaration of Independence appealed to, but directly to the “Supreme Judge of the World”. It was through the revivalism of the first half of the Eighteenth Century that the colonists were finally able to step out from under the protectorate of the established Christian churches and assert religious control over their own nation’s destiny.

Government as Contract

NAVIGATION

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Another effect of the Great Awakening on colonial culture was the growth of the notion of state rule as a contract with the people.

Parishioners during the revival gained an understanding of covenants with their churches as contractual schemes; they argued that each believer owed the church their obedience, and the churches in turn owed their congregants the duty to be faithful to the Gospel. Parishioners therefore reserved the right to dissolve the covenant and to sever ties with the church without prior permission. This notion of covenant was a popular one in Puritan society and reflected a common biblical understanding of association. Present in the Mayflower Compact and later forming an ideological basis for breaking from Great Britain, the notion of covenant grew to link religion and politics in the colonies.

The ideals of Puritanical covenant theology were manifested in the “social compact” of the Declaration of Independence.

Under this theory, implicit in the Declaration, disassociated individuals in the “state of nature” agree to live and be bound together under consensual government. With the frequency by which believers broke away from larger churches to form splinter groups, the colonists must have been accustomed to separating themselves from larger institutions.

Religious Uniformity

Perhaps the greatest fuel added to the revolutionary fire that began burning in the latter half of the 18th Century was religious pluralism within the colonies. Unlike England, which after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had become spiritually stagnant under the Church of England, the colonists adhered to no single denomination. The splits in churches that revivalism had caused prevented uniformity in religion from becoming a reality. While groups such as the Quakers and Anglicans still existed in areas, none could rise to dominate the religious scene and become the primary American religion. So long as the colonists did not become complacent, their religious zeal would continue to burn strong.

Eventually, this religious zeal turned to revolution and sentiments of self-governance. That the religious spirit of the colonists was a necessary component to the drive for independence is confirmed in the sentiments of those who lived during the period of fighting. As British statesman William Knox noted about the American drive for independence, “Every man being thus allowed to be his own Pope, he becomes disposed to wish to become his own King”.

John Adams gave credit to the Great Awakening as the source of motivation behind the war, and in certain parts of England the revolution was even called the “Presbyterian Rebellion”.

Shared Goals

The religious revival of the Great Awakening melded the colonists in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. Eighteenth Century Americans thought of religion as something communitarian – a form of social cooperation – rather than a competitive endeavor of individuals that the world of commerce envisioned. Christians were told to be benevolent and to make self-sacrifices, and many were bound together by way of their shared mass conversions. Thus, they could afford to make sacrifices for their land in times of need.

Another shared sentiment of the chiefly Protestant nation was a fear of Catholic domination. While this feeling may have been contributed to by fear of foreign political domination, the

revivalist zeal of the colonists no doubt played a part in the anti-hierarchical nature of anti-Catholic attitudes. Through cataclysmic events such as world earthquakes in 1727 and 1755, expectations of the new millennial age increased. The colonists viewed these as divine signs, and so when questions arose about the Antichrist they turned to the Catholics. They considered the pope to be the enemy during the French and Indian War, and celebrations in Boston and in other places, Anti-Pope Day furthered Protestant zeal.

Anti-Catholicism was one of the most prominent traits in the colonies prior to the revolution. This attitude was significant in the New England way of life and existed not only in the churches but also in taverns, newspapers, and schools. Despite political or theological differences between colonists, one common understanding shared by all was an opposition to Roman Catholicism. So when the “popish” threat subsided somewhat with the passing of the French and Indian War, the colonists searched for a new Antichrist at which they could direct their attention. They found him in George III, who needed to be expelled from the colonies in order to bring forth the new age of righteousness. The religious fervor spawned by the Great Awakening provided the catalyst for political and military action necessary for fulfillment of religious expectations. The crusade against the Catholics provided the necessary focal point over the course of the 18th Century until the new crusade against the British took over.

Further Reading

God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution, by Thomas S. Kidd

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